

Democracy Demands Accountability

By Col. Daniel Smith (Ret.) | April 12, 2005

In the past 17 months, President Bush has undertaken a concerted effort to wrap his foreign policy in the folds of freedom and democracy. Many observers believe his constant and consistent emphasis has succeeded in altering the “rules of engagement” between the public and the White House. After all, who would opt for slavery and despotism?

This is, of course, an example of the proverbial false dichotomy, the “straw man” pundits and politicians love to build and then knock down. The real alternatives lie between governance that is accountable under law and an *ad hoc*, seat-of-the pants approach that—like Dorothy’s brainless straw man—is geared to “do something, anything” and then consciously “spins” various incomplete or meager “achievements” in an effort to defend questionable means and exonerate high-level policymakers from accountability.

Four examples demonstrate the chasm between the administration’s “spins” and hard reality.

1. Spin: “Military intervention awakened democratic yearnings.” Iraqis elected a 275 member National Assembly on January 30, hailed by President Bush—along with earlier presidential elections in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Ukraine—as examples of how the March 2003 invasion of Iraq reinvigorated democracy’s march forward.

Reality: Six weeks later, in the heavily defended “Green Zone,” the assembly met for the first time, and adjourning after 90 minutes. Eight weeks after the election, Iraq remains bereft of a functioning transitional executive, and for the second time, the assembly failed to elect a speaker. So on top of being disillusioned by the inability of the coalition to restore reliable, basic governmental services, growing numbers of Iraqis are angry at what they see as selfish bickering by politicians and political blocs.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, legislative elections first scheduled for July 2004, rescheduled for October and then May 2005, have had to be reset once again for September 2005. In the interim, President Hamid Karzai governs by decree, ordinary Afghans endure

continued warlord-inspired violence, and Washington, rather than concentrating efforts to reduce the demand for illicit drugs on the streets of this country, demands Kabul confront the increase in opium production by impoverished Afghan farmers by spraying herbicides.

2. Spin: “Security is improving.” Security—freedom from fear of physical harm—is being extended throughout Iraq as the number of trained and deployed Iraqi security forces rises.

Reality: Baghdad barbers who give customers western-style haircuts or a shave are being murdered (along with their clients, according to the *Washington Post*). (In contrast, North Koreans sporting South Korean hairstyles reportedly are “just” imprisoned.) On a related security issue, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declined in February 2005 to give Congress (and the U.S. public) an estimate of insurgent strength in Iraq, thereby effectively precluding any meaningful measure of the effectiveness of coalition operations. In mid-March, the Director of Defense Intelligence pegged insurgent strength at “15,000 to 20, 000,” adding that the armed opposition “has grown in size and complexity over the past year.” Moreover, Pentagon officials and military field commanders now concede that the reported numbers of “trained” Iraqi security forces includes thousands who are only partially trained or who are absent from their units—an acknowledgment obtained only after close questioning by members of Congress.

3. Spin: “Torture is an aberration.” In response to revelations of numerous violations of international laws regarding physical and psychological torture, revisions to interrogation and detainee-handling procedures have lowered alleged incidents. Moreover, the



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incarceration of “ghost” detainees and their transfer (rendition) to countries known to or suspected of using torture is no longer done without first obtaining a “no-torture” pledge.

Reality: Even as allegations of current prisoner abuse decline, the investigations still in progress continue to turn up previously unreported cases. On CIA prisoner renditions to “cooperating” governments, even CIA chief Porter Goss had to acknowledge that the verbal “no-torture” pledges are as ephemeral as air. “Once they’re [detainees] out of our control, there’s only so much we can do.” Unlike Goss and President Bush (“the promise we receive” before sending people), U.S. courts seem less inclined to be satisfied with merely the letter of the law. “Repatriation” of 13 Yemenis held in Guantanamo has been blocked pending a court hearing on the risk they will be tortured if returned. And the State Department is searching for a country willing to accept 22 ethnic Uighers, also in Guantanamo, rather than return them to China and certain torture.

4. Spin: “Justice is being served.” The latest (the tenth) Pentagon investigation of violations of Geneva and anti-torture conventions to be completed, this one by Navy Vice Adm. Albert T. Church III, declined to assign any responsibility for prisoner abuses and even homicides beyond low-ranking individuals. Separately, Army diversion of \$48 million appropriated for ongoing operations to buy 42 unmanned aerial vehicles costing approximately one

million each was termed “inappropriate” rather than what it is: a violation of law.

Reality: In “war,” responsibility and accountability rapidly become four-letter words while “passing the buck” becomes a routine one-way journey—down. The result, predictably, is more justification than justice, more legalism than judicial “spirit,” the rule by law in place of the rule of law.

All of which points to the difference between “spun” and real democracies, between platitudes passed down by elites who rule with impunity and accountable power that rises upward from the people.

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Recommended citation:

Col. Daniel Smith (Ret.), “Democracy Demands Accountability,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, April 12, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2005/0504democracy.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Col. Daniel Smith (Ret.)

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

